DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 146 608 CS 203 728

AUTHOR Pfatteicher, Philip H.
TITLE Indians, Deer, and Flowers: Ancient Poetry and the Composition Class.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS American Indians; *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Greek Literature; Language Attitudes; *Literary Analysis; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

This paper examines fragments of American Indian and Greek poetry and suggests that they be used in English composition classes as examples of the power of language. Because the poetry is brief and deceptively obvious, it invites careful examination of the expressive meaning of each word. It is concluded that, in an age when people are inundated with examples of both good and bad language usage, teachers can use poems from a past age to help students appreciate the opportunity for exploration, discovery, and understanding that effective literary composition provides. (RL)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Philip H. Pfatteicher

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

ED146608

CS203728

Indians, Deer, and Flowers

Ancient Poetry and the Composition Class

Philip H. Pfatteicher

Composition is about techniques of writing, but more importantly composition is about exploration and discovery. One cannot write well without exploring and learning about oneself and the world. Writing is for discovery and understanding.

Part of this discovery has to do with the nature of language itself. When we teach students to write, we try to make them sensitive to language, its beauty, its power, its possibilities. We do it sometimes by assigning readings in what we consider to be "good literature" (however we may define that). We do it sometimes by having students read some of the growing number of complaints about careless and sloppy language.

A couple of years ago, Jean Stafford had an article in the New York Times,[1] "At this Point in Time, TV is Murdering the English Language." With Watergate in the news she said:

> The high linguistic crimes committed by television's newscasters and advertisers have impoverished the richest language in the world. The crown jewels have been smashed to smithereens and the gold settings have been hocked. For the diamonds and rubies and pearls of great price, gravel agglutinated with No-cal honey has been substituted.
>
> The misuse of words, the abuse of grammar, the resort to circumlocation, the lapses into mispronunciation . . .
> and other liberties of speech are taken as frequently on radio as on television,

she observed, but it is doubly embarrassing "to both see and to hear" these affronts to sensitivity. I had my students read the article. They asked, "Why is she so upset?"

Edwin Newman has two books of grousing about the death of English (Strictly Speaking and A Civil Tongue). The books are pleasant enough to those of us who are already convinced of his assumption. They are unread by those who need to listen to him and are found boring by most of those we tell to read them.

How then does one help students see the possibilities of language? I should like to suggest that the poetry of the Americans Indians and of the Greek Anthology may be of some value in helping students begin to see the power of language. "Communicating the third American Century" may be enriched by going back a couple of thousand years.

Much of this poetry is fragmentary, to be sure. The Greek Anthology collects many remnants, and the Native American poetry, one needs to remember, is only part of a whole experience of music and words and dance. Nonetheless, this poetry can be useful precisely because it is so brief.

First of all, these little poems of few words force readers to examine them closely and carefully, encouraging readers to feel the individual words intensely. This ancient poetry is a useful introduction to the class in literature, but it is a helpful adjunct to the composition class as well.

Such poetry is deceptively obvious in its simplicity. Its very brevity invites careful examination. Why this word? Why is this simple action or observation taken as a subject? How much lies behind each key word? An example that I enjoy having students look at is simply this from the Colorado River Basin:

The deer
looks at a flower.[2]

That's all there is to it. It is simple, easy to parody. "The professor stands on the floor." "The student sits in the chair." But is the parody equal to the original? Why a deer? Why a flower? Why both in one poem? What similarities are there between them? What contrasts? Why should there be an attraction of one to the other?

The deer: a living creature, graceful and handsome, solid and strong, sizeable, colored so as to be hidden in the woods, free to move through the woodland, sentient. A flower: also alive, graceful and beautiful, but delicate and fragile, small, colored so as to attract attention, fixed in one place, without the same sentient faculty as the deer. The deer with the ability to see looks at the flower, the higher order of nature looking down literally and figuratively at a lower order which is no less beautiful. The deer stands between the human and the flower in the chain of being. Can the deer, we may perhaps wonder, respond to the delicate beauty of the flower? The poem suggests it, but makes no commitment.

A human sees the scene and makes a song of it. A person looks at the deer looking at the flower. The interaction expands as the complex relationships and interdependence of nature subtly unfold. The deer links the human and the flower, yet the singer sees both the deer and the flower and the relationships between them. Moreover, as the deer looks at the flower in the song, so the audience looks at the singer who also is a source of beauty. The syllogism is suggested:

audience: singer:: deer: flower.

A tiny incident. Yet as Donald Hall reminds us in his wise book Writing Well, "Nothing fully understood is trivial."[3]

Another example is the little song by Naquali of the Northwest coast:

I wonder what my future life
will do to me.[4]

The interest here is the awareness of the power of life to change us. The poem is not a bold challenge to seize life and make of it and of ourselves what we will. Rather the singer is passive as he muses not what he will become but what life will do to him. He is the waiting victim. Here, hidden in two lines, are all of our apprehensions of what may lie ahead with age--that we will be battered and left in loneliness and grief and perhaps sickness. There is apprehension, yet not cowardice nor utter passivity. For there is a kind of quiet noble courage and dignity here too.

Again, a Chippewa singer exults in his creation, singing simply,

My music
reaches
to the sky.[5]

We listen to the pride of the singer whose music flies beyond the earth and who is intoxicated by the soaring power of song. It is not a general praise of the power of music, but a personal triumph: "My music." The singer has a share in this transcendent power. His music flies as far as music can reach.

The song joins the two worlds: the home of the gods and the earth. The gulf is spanned not by a visible bridge but by the intangible power of song. It becomes a means by which gods and people can communicate. It is a poem of exultant pride of a singer who rejoices in his enormous gift. Yet there is a hint of limitation here too, for the song may perhaps not penetrate

the heavens.

The Omaha tribal prayer

> Wa-kon'da
> here needy he stands,
> and I am he[6]

is a pleasantly indirect cry to God. Instead of a direct request (the "Lord have mercy" of the Christian tradition, for example) the Omaha in a kind of intercession calls Wa-kon'da's attention to a needy person standing before him, and then, having done that, identifies himself with that needy person. It is a notable achievement of delicate perspective and humility.

A Chippewa love song exults in the possession of love, and then carefully qualifies the lover's confidence:

> Oh
> I am thinking
> Oh
> I am thinking
> I have found my lover.
> Oh
> I think it is so.[7]

The delightful play on the word "think" with the reservation characteristic of all lovers reveals a universal theme of the uncertainty and pleasant torment of love. That little doubt which creeps in at the end is, as all the poets know, all too characteristic of love.

A similar refusal to be wholly taken in by emotion is seen in George Cronyn's "interpretation" of a Native American theme:

> The wind is carrying me round the sky;
> The wind is carrying me round the sky--
> My body is here in the valley--
> The wind is carrying me round the sky.[8]

Rationality intrudes in the third line, and then it is surpassed, even denied, in the last line.

A Pawnee war song, sung when a warrior goes out alone on a warpath from which he might well never return, sings:

> Let us see, is this real
> Let us see, is this real,
> This life I am living?
> Ye gods, who dwell everywhere,
> Let us see, is this real,
> This life I am living?[9]

The surprisingly modern song raises large questions about the nature and location of reality.

These brief Native American poems then span the whole range of human emotions--love and death and religion and philosophy and music--with remarkably controlled conciseness.

Another body of brief, even fragmentary, poems that require close attention to their language is found in the Greek Anthology. The collection was compiled in the tenth century of the Christian Era, but the lyrics flourished from the middle of the seventh century to the end of the sixth century B.C.

In perhaps the best known Greek epitaph, Simonides wrote simply and movingly of the dead at Thermopylae,

> Traveller, take this word to the men of Lakedaimon:
> We who lie buried here did what they told us to do.[10]

The fallen ask the traveller, who is free to move about (it is "stranger" literally in the Greek, someone the dead have never met), to carry for them the message back to their superiors in Sparta that the dead lie fallen having obeyed the code of their city. They had acted as Spartans and had

been brought up to act. It is a poem first of all of obedience and faithfulness, of pride in having done one's duty, even in death. But one cannot say that without implying a judgment on that code of precepts which required them to spend their lives in obedience to laws they could not understand, and a judgment upon those whose orders resulted in the destruction of young lives. But the poem is delicately balanced between pride and judgment, and neither is quite what is said. Rather, it is a mixture which will not let us see and feel one without the other. Such is war. Such is life. And therein lies the poignancy of the inscription.

Moreover, the relationship between the dead and the travelling stranger is interesting. The command "take this word" is in the Greek an infinitive used as an imperative, which was a military use.[11] The fallen warriors still use military language. They were used to receiving orders and to giving orders, and so as they lie dead, having obeyed their orders, so they in turn give a command to the stranger who passes by and expect that it will be obeyed. The pathos is complicated by the authoritarian tone.

Archilochus of Paros both boasted of his strength and confessed his dependence upon weapons of war in the epigram

> By spear is kneaded the bread I eat, by spear my Ismaric wine is won, which I drink leaning upon my spear.[12]

The interest lies chiefly in the repetition of "spear" of course. Beneath the boasting and the bravado lies a deeper insecurity. For those who are confident need not call so much attention to their strength.

In another poem he complains

> Some barbarian is waving my shield, since I was obliged to leave that perfectly good piece of equipment behind under a bush. But I got away, so what does it matter?[13]

In a casual dismissal of his lost shield, Archilochus weighs the relative value of life versus the value of his armor.

Archilochus was also fascinated by the physical symptoms of love, a new theme in Greek poetry. For example,

> Here I lie mournful with desire,
> feeble in bitterness of the pain gods upon me
> Struck through the bones with love.[14]

Or again,

> Such is the passion for love that has twisted its way beneath
> my heartstrings
> and closed deep mist across my eyes
> stealing the soft heart from inside my body.[15]

What is interesting in these two descriptions is that the onslaught of love is described in the language or the approach of death: "mournful," "bitterness," "struck through the bones," "twisted its way," "closed deep mist across my eyes," "stealing the soft heart." The coming of love is fearful, unpleasant.

Alcman of Sparta wrote of one kind of love:

> This is not Aphrodite, but the lewd love-boy, playing
> like a child, running the flowers, across the do-not-touch-me
> meadow grass.[16]

Young love in its carelessness crushes the flowers under foot, and the poet instead of glorying in the appearance of love, sympathizes with its victims. Love is of various kinds and degrees, and it is not always to be welcomed, nor is it always consoling. This kind of love can damage.

A scrap of song by Praxilla of Sicyon has the dying Adonis say

> Loveliest of what I leave behind is the sunlight,
> and loveliest after that the shining stars, and the moon's
> but also cucumbers that are ripe, and pears, and apples.[17]

The list moves from the visual and sensual delight of the brightness and warmth and clarity of the sun to the purely visual pleasure of the paler reflection of that light in the moon and stars--appropriate for the coming of death as the light of life fades. But then, in a new and altogether unexpected burst of strength and memory, the immediate and fully sensual delights of fruits and vegetables are made equal to the distant starlight. Things close at hand that please the eye and hand and mouth and nose are as precious as the distant and noble lights of heaven. Simple things are not ordinary things.

These brief fragments of Greek poetry and American Indian poetry are filled with feeling, and, once one learns to read them carefully and sensitively, one cannot miss their emotional and intellectual power. They are splendid examples of language under the most careful discipline and control. That is first.

Secondly, the fragmentary nature of this poetry is part of its value, especially for the composition class. Beneath language is a profound mystery that is ever elusive. Michael Novak observes,

> Words are like pinpoints in a darkness. Aiming them this way, then that, calling up one image and then a contrasting one, we try to bring to the surface of attention what we cannot fully master, fully state. Around each of our words there is more space, more silence, then pinned content.[18]

It helps to remember, moreover, that this poetry--both Greek and Indian--is read by us in translation. This too can be a useful reminder that language is tentative and is never absolute.

Yet as the ancients were aware, language is power. Words--especially when accompanied by music and actions--do things. So a Southwest Indian singer

exults

> Singing to the gods in supplication;
> Singing to the gods in supplication,
> Thus my magic power is uplifted,
> My power is uplifted as I sing.[19]

The singer by his chanted words exerts strong influence on his circumstances and by his word can effect changes. Song, as Ruth Underhill observes, "is not simply self-expression. It was a magic which called upon the powers of Nature and constrained them to man's will. People sang in trouble, in danger, to cure the sick, to confound their enemies, and to make the crops grow."[20] So a Chippewa song over a dying person sings

> You are a spirit,
> I am making you a spirit,
> In the place where I sit
> I am making you a spirit.[21]

The song is more than an observation of dying or an encouragement to the dying person. It is itself a participation in the process of transformation. The song helps make the dying person a spirit.

This poetry springs from an awareness of the creative power of language, and when students read it they are brought into contact with an old yet wholly new expression of the potentiality inherent in language. Nor can it be dismissed as a primitive and now outgrown idea.

In a tradition familiar to some students, according to Genesis "In the beginning . . . God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light." The word was creative. In the ancient Hebrew understanding God created the universe by his word, and that is a tradition that is still living for some students.[22]

Again Marghanita Laski in an essay on "Words" in the Times Literary Supplement wrote:

> Why was it, I asked myself, that after an orgy of carding modern material, I always felt a little depressed, perhaps arid or even soiled, and tended to seek refreshment by a spot of carding in George Eliot or in seventeenth-century laundry lists? It wasn't the matter that weighed me down; reviewers must soon learn to be almost impervious to the tone of the matter. It was, I decided, the cumulative effect of the collected words. Apparently words are something that can't, even with the coldest intentions in the world, be handled without emotional effect.[23]

From there it is not a long step to contemporary application. Around us there are abundant examples of how language does control. We have been through Watergate, and we nearly drown in advertising. But the approach may best be made indirectly by going back to ancient poetry. The ancient understanding of the depth and power of language can have meaning for us still as we move into our third century.

Notes

1. 15 September 1974.

2. George W. Cronyn, ed. American Indian Poetry: An Anthology of Songs and Chants (New York: Liveright, 1962), p. 360.

3. Donald Hall, Writing Well 2nd ed. (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown, 1976), p. 248.

4. Cronyn, p. 170.

5. Margot Astrov, ed. American Indian Prose and Poetry (New York: Capricorn, 1962), p. 19.

6. Ibid., p. 135.

7. Ibid., p. 77.

8. Cronyn, p. 239.

9. Astrov, p. 109.

10. Richmond Lattimore trans., Greek Lyrics 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960), p. 56.

11. John Moore, ed., Greek Lyric Poets (Cambridge: Harvard, 1947), p. 104.

12. Lattimore, p. 1.

13. Ibid., p. 2.

14. Ibid., p. 5.

15. Ibid., p. 5.

16. Ibid., p. 36.

17. Ibid., p. 49.

18. Michael Novak, "Culture and Imagination," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 10:1 (Winter, 1973), p. 135.

19. Cronyn, p. 113.

20. Singing for Power, quoted in Astrov, p. 202.

21. Astrov, p. 75.

22. See also Psalm 33:6, 9.

23. 1 August 1968, p. 882.